

Title: "A Productive Opening Idea": Chess and Soviet Culture in the Cold War

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The Soviet Union experienced its first major chess boom in connection with an international tournament held in Moscow in 1925. The organizer of the tournament was Nikolai Krylenko, an old Bolshevik, powerful prosecutor, and avid chess player. Krylenko had taken the reins of Soviet chess in 1924 and quickly politicized the game with slogans such as "Chess to the masses!" and "Make way for chess!"; he even dreamt of a five-year plan for chess development throughout the Soviet Union. His ideas were typically grandiose and seemingly impractical, and yet it is precisely in this ancient and historically aristocratic game of strategy that the Soviet sports machine would achieve its most phenomenal success. Chess was indeed brought to the masses, and Soviet society indeed "made way" for the game by affording its practitioners unheard- of respect and adulation. Former Komsomolets Mikhail Botvinnik won the world championship in 1948, and Soviet players held the title for the next 25 years, routinely dominating in team events such as the Chess Olympiads. Their success represented the triumph of a new collective and scientific approach to a game traditionally associated with individual personalities and innate talent or genius. Strong government support for leading players and institutionalized chess education were a major component of the Soviets' success, but no less important was the prestige the game enjoyed in Soviet culture, especially as compared to its underground status in the West. My project examines this phenomenon and the role chess played in the Soviet national identity, focusing on memoirs and other writings by the great Soviet world champions (including Botvinnik, Vasily Smyslov, and Mikhail Tal) and their contemporaries (including David Bronstein, Yuri Averbakh, and Genna Sosonko). The "Soviet Chess School," its origins, and its achievements have received almost no critical attention outside the narrow world of professional chess, but its complex history reveals much about the Soviet cultural project overall, and this heritage remains highly relevant in post-Soviet Russia.